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## Toward better water policies

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Cal-Fed's most vital initiatives go beyond issues of water storage

There was a predictable reaction when California Gov. Davis and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt recently unveiled their solution for making the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta a healthier home for fish and a

more reliable source of water for humans.

The various interests who war over water -- the environmental establishment, farmers and urbanites -- were quick to assess the package based on its proposals for new plumbing.

But for just a moment, set aside debate about how many reservoirs to expand or build, how many new canals to dig. The plumbing isn't what's most notable, or commendable, about the Cal-Fed plan.

That honor belongs to the water policy initiatives Davis and Babbitt have in mind for California.

An example: California, with a few notable exceptions, does not now manage its groundwater. Unlike most other Western states, groundwater here is largely treated as a limitless private commodity, not a finite public resource.

In a single sentence on Page 15 of the Davis-Babbitt water strategy -- in journalism that is known as "burying the lead" -- Cal-Fed seeks to rewrite the governance for groundwater. "Cal-Fed believes in and will support legislation that supports groundwater management at the basin level," say

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Davis and Babbitt. What's more, if local governments fail to enact groundwater management by 2004, the spigot of Cal-Fed funds for local projects would run dry.

Another initiative would alter communities such as Sacramento and Modesto that have resisted water meters for generations: "Cal-Fed agencies will work with the California Legislature to develop legislation ... requiring the appropriate measurement of all water uses in California." Translation: water meters.

There's more. Cal-Fed advances the vital concept of water regionalism.

The San Joaquin Valley, for example, has Sierra water that is high in quality but low in reliability. Southern California has delta water that is higher in reliability, yet lower in quality.

If San Joaquin would trade some of that quality Sierra water for reliable delta water, everyone could benefit. The same blending strategy holds promise for the separate water fiefdoms of the Bay Area.

Much of that would require new legislation. Is the Legislature up to the task?

Reforming water policy in California is magnitudes more difficult than appropriating money for new plumbing.

An example is how the Senate Agriculture and Water Committee is scurrying for cover as it faces worthy legislation to require a local water plan to sustain a local growth plan

(Assembly Bill 1219).

The only hope is for Davis and his capable water team to actively navigate the Cal-Fed policy agenda through the Legislature. If he succeeds, history will recognize Davis along with a small handful of California governors, Pat Brown being the last, who brightened California's future through his water leadership.



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